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What a Performance (1987) by Anna Mendelssohn

INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT

From the late seventies, British-born Anna Mendelssohn (1948-2009) authored fifteen poetry collections and half a dozen short fictions and dramas, often publishing under the name Grace Lake. Mendelssohn's passion for international vanguardism was lifelong: in Turkey in 1969, she translated the poetry of political exile Nâzim Hikmet; in her later years, she undertook editorial work on Gisèle Prassinos, the surrealist child prodigy celebrated by André Breton. Mendelssohn's writing emerged in journals receptive to experimentalism, among them, *Parataxis*, *Jacket 2*, *Critical Quarterly*, and *Comparative Criticism*. Publishers including Methuen, Bloodaxe, Burning Deck, and Shearsman pursued book-length editions of her writing. Her most readily available text remains *Implacable Art* (Salt 2000). In 1990, Mendelssohn was anthologised in collections released by Virago, Macmillan, and Reality Street. Iain Sinclair included Mendelssohn in his era-defining *Conductors of Chaos* (1996); in 2004, she featured in Rod Mengham and John Kinsella's *Vanishing Points* alongside John Ashbery and Susan Howe. During the eighties and nineties, Mendelssohn was invited to read at the University of Cambridge, London's Royal Festival Hall and Southbank Centre, and the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris.

A consummate autodidact, Mendelssohn was a polymath: a writer, visual artist, performer, and musician. Her mature artwork is predominantly pen and ink. Particularly stunning are her ideogrammatic works that further the innovations of Pound, Henri Michaux, and British artist Jack Smith. Mendelssohn appeared in Jean-Luc Godard's documentary *British Sounds* (1969) whilst a student at the University of Essex. In the nineties, she won two musical fellowships, and placed in a German composition competition.

Two legal battles parenthesise Mendelssohn's adult life. The first is the Stoke Newington Eight trial of 1972, then the lengthiest in British criminal history. The second generation of a politicised, Jewish family, Mendelssohn was a known radical. She participated in London squatting and housing lobbies; she wrote for underground papers *Strike!* and *Frendz*. Mendelssohn was one of thousands of sixties' students who agitated for improved civil rights and against the Vietnam War. When global protest failed to secure observable change, some hundreds of these thousands formed urban guerrilla groups, among them, the American Weathermen, the Italian Red Brigades and, in Germany, Baader-Meinhof. Britain's Angry Brigade was part of this wave. By comparison with their better-known counterparts, The Angry Brigade revolution was minimal, involving twenty-five small-scale bombings at airports, trade centres, embassies, and the BBC van at a Miss World beauty pageant in 1970. Mendelssohn's finger-prints were discovered on a page of *Rolling Stone* magazine that was in the same plastic bag as one of those bombs. Of the fourteen sets of prints the bag contained, eleven were never identified. Mendelssohn expertly defended herself in court, pleading innocent. She was convicted for conspiracy to cause explosions on December 6, 1972, receiving a decade-long sentence.

In London's Holloway Prison, Mendelssohn founded a union, petitioned for better conditions, taught fellow inmates literacy, and ran dramatic productions. These efforts facilitated her early parole in 1976, aged 28. Between 1980 and 1985, Mendelssohn had three longed-for children. She enrolled at Cambridge University in 1984, determined to raise her family and succeed academically. Poverty and ill health exerted their daily grind, as did the stigma of single parenthood. A family upon whom Mendelssohn relied heavily demanded routine, financial assistance, and the involvement of a third party: social services. For a woman who had served

time, this authoritative scrutiny was distinctly unwelcome. Still less welcome was the possibility that her past might be unearthed in family court. In 1988, Mendelssohn reluctantly gave permission to have her children temporarily fostered. They were never returned to her care. Mendelssohn's lawyer was so distressed by her case that he abandoned child custody litigation. The loss of her children permeates Mendelssohn's late work.

After her death, Mendelssohn's children generously donated her archive to the University of Sussex. The vast, material collection encompasses nearly 800 notebooks and an estimated 5,000 poems. Cataloguing in 2014-15 unearthed a memoir begun in the seventies and revised into the nineties. *What a Performance* is the most extensive portion of that ongoing project. Themes and passages from this text can be found in memoirs Mendelssohn wrote in the early eighties, and a fulsome, if partial, manuscript version exists in a 1987 notebook. But *What a Performance* is a discrete entity: some portions are drafted three or four times and then edited again; it is typed, titled, sub-titled, formatted. Only three pages bear numbers, and a definitive fair copy does not exist. These extracts comprise half of the entirety, and are silently edited for typos and minor errors. Dated 1987, *What a Performance* was composed at the height of Mendelssohn's legal conflicts over her children, a period when Mendelssohn was simultaneously studying, recovering from an extended hospital stay, and mourning her grandmother's death.

Mendelssohn shares biographical coordinates with Susan Stern of the Weathermen and with Jane Alpert, who belonged to an urban guerrilla cell that bombed government and corporate buildings in New York in 1969. All three were raised in Jewish households, experienced youthful radical awakenings, and experienced incarceration. All articulate their involvement in politicised violence in carefully crafted memoirs. But unlike Stern and Alpert, Mendelssohn eschews a confessional, fluid, book-length narrative that appeals to the reader's sympathy. Instead, the structure of *What a Performance* reflects the complexity of Mendelssohn's experience.

Mendelssohn dubbed her 1972 court case "the show trial" and *What a Performance* similarly foregrounds artifice, presenting individuals as actors, characters, authors. On occasion, Mendelssohn addresses a "scripter" or "scriptress". This figure appears based on Noella Smith, a BAFTA-award winning British screenwriter who befriended Mendelssohn at Essex, and who agreed, nearly twenty years later, to work with her on a screenplay about sixties' activism. Mendelssohn's primary motivation was much-needed income. After months of meetings, Smith sent Mendelssohn a film treatment. The final page remains in the archive, replete with criticisms in Mendelssohn's hand. The crux of Mendelssohn's resistance arises in an unsent letter to the film-maker, where she states that Smith over-emphasises her politics, failing to present her "as centrally poetic with Politics as the aggressor, the nuisance, the tragedy." Midway through 1987, Mendelssohn abandoned the collaboration. *What a Performance* is her solo riposte to those endeavours, one where "scripter" becomes a cypher for Mendelssohn's vanguard distaste for creative success and class privilege. Paradoxically, admiration for Mendelssohn's ample charisma and intelligence compounded her irresolvable, consuming need to be definitively exculpated as a victim of circumstance. This need was mitigated by an equal and paralysing fear of exposure, one consistent with Mendelssohn's academic scepticism toward the value of biography.

Mendelssohn's memoir is akin to Menippean satire: often scabrous, this mixture of genre and voice addresses her Northern, working-class, Jewish upbringing; activism and prison time; parenting and her children's foster carers. Throughout, Mendelssohn yearns for a "slow life, free from harm", and seeks the legitimisation of her passionate creative drive. Allusions are made to Rembrandt, Voltaire, Swinburne, Simone Weil, Stockhausen, and Cassavetes, among others; some references are avowedly political, as in assaults on Thatcher and the use of Agent Orange. Subtitles and unusual formatting highlight the episodic nature; occasional stage directions insist upon the text's status as a drama; polemic, reportage, and poetry (lyric and prose) surface. Mendelssohn is self-referential about the collage of recollection that results, one that disrupts

subjective coherency, chronology, and straightforward causalities. The result is plea, catharsis, and self-mockery, as when Mendelssohn posits herself as the unpredictable, violent revolutionary she was often reduced to by the mainstream press.

Charging *The Angry Brigade* with undue faith in revolutionary fictions, Mendelssohn's memoir exposes her own complicitous story-telling, not least by featuring a protagonist who oscillates between an autobiographical "I" and third-person characterisations. Mendelssohn's sense of herself as an ostracised outlaw is a textual refrain; she believed she was forever marked by her subversive past. Hence she becomes "Miranda", a name evoking the 1966 US legislation protecting an arrested individual's right to remain silent. In an earlier Mendelssohn text, *Inbuilt Flash Nix* (1985), a Miranda is conflated with the Japanese camera brand of the same name, and turns an exposing lens on assailants. As in *What a Performance*, this Miranda is expressly aligned with Prospero's daughter in *The Tempest*. Like Shakespeare's Miranda, Mendelssohn's is banished by association, victimised by a Caliban, and in pursuit of a brave new world. But by turns, Miranda is also Ariel, a creative, powerfully magical spirit existing among "airy people" who "float everywhere".

At the close of *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler encourages humanities scholars to ensure that "oppositional voices are...valued for the instigation to a sensate democracy they occasionally perform." Mendelssohn's is just such an importantly unique voice. In content and form, *What a Performance* challenges oversimplified, and historically male-dominated, discourse about terrorism. Resisting revolutionary fervour and outright condemnation alike, Mendelssohn offers an innovative way forward in the increasingly urgent debate about the constitution and consequences of extremism.

Sara Crangle extends thanks Anna Mendelssohn's children for permission to edit and publish this memoir; to the archivist Simon Coleman, who unearthed it from Mendelssohn's papers; and to Noella Smith, who provided details of its gestation.